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Many Area Schools Do Well In U.S. News Rankings

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U.S. News & World Report Thursday published its 2010 rankings of colleges and universities, rating many colleges and universities in the Philadelphia area near the top.

Fairly close by in central New Jersey, Princeton was rated first among national universities, tied with Harvard. Well-rated national universities in or near southeastern Pennsylvania included the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia (tying several other top schools for fourth) and Bethlehem's Lehigh University (ranked 35th). Drexel University in Philadelphia was ranked 88th.

Villanova University took the top title for northern master's universities (also called regional universities). St. Joseph's University was ranked 10th, La Salle University was ranked 18th and Glenside's Arcadia University ranked 18th.

U.S. News also highly rated several liberal arts colleges. Swarthmore College ranked third, Haverford College ranked 10th, Bryn Mawr College was rated 25th and Lafayette College was rated 35th.

The national news magazine also compiled data on the schools' graduation rates, costs and other variables that enter into a student's decision about which school to send an application.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, said this broad availability of information on colleges and universities from U.S. News and other sources, helps make American higher education the envy of the world.

"If you compare higher ed to K-12, higher ed works fantastically," he said. "You have truly empowered consumers so that they can go to a school based on their interests."

Mr. McCluskey said there exists no comparable measure of K-12 institutions that would help parents decide where to send their children for primary or secondary schooling. While American universities generally surpass universities elsewhere in the world in terms of academic value, American K-12 schools generally under-perform those in the rest of the industrialized world, he said.

One reason for this, he said, is that most other industrialized nations offer more educational choice than the U.S. does. Sweden and the Netherlands, for example, fit the American stereotype of big-government European social democracies, but not, in Mr. McCluskey's estimation, with regard to education. Other countries, such as South Korea and Japan, do not have much school choice but they do have major for-profit tutoring industries to which students often turn to boost their achievement.

"The markets are at work elsewhere in K-12, more so than here," he said.

Nonetheless, as many American parents and students sense whenever tuition comes due, American higher education does present its share of headaches.

“There are lots of problems with American higher education, but there is really one in particular and that is the cost,” Mr. McCluskey said. “Tuition keeps skyrocketing.”

What he said many families might not be aware of is the degree to which federal student aid and state aid to public universities accelerates the inflation of tuition. When the government artificially makes college more affordable, the schools can act on that knowledge by raising their prices.

In the short run, Mr. McCluskey said, the government should remedy this problem by doing away with subsidies that aren’t targeted to help economically disadvantaged students. In the long run, he added, public officials sensitive to the causes of tuition inflation should strongly appeal to the public to resist requesting hikes in higher-education spending.

Moreover, he said, part of the problem he perceives may become self-solving. He said some scholars predict a “bubble” in higher education similar to the housing-market bubble wherein people saw assets become much more expensive than they should have been.

It’s possible that “people will conclude that what they get for all that money isn’t worth it,” he said. Such a realization would lead some students to pursue career paths that didn’t involve formal university training while others would attend college with less aid but at a lower cost.

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